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Senate intelligence panel a hurdle in move to aid Nicaraguan rebels

By Thomas D. Brandt
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The Republican-controlled Senate Intelligence Committee is drawing fire from conservatives who say it is a center of resistance to the Reagan administration's final push for congressional approval of aid for the rebels fighting Nicaragua's Marxist government.

Conservative sources in Congress have told The Washington Times that under Sen. David Durenberger of Minnesota, the Republican chairman, and Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the Democratic vice chairman, they expect the intelligence committee to reorganize itself and also schedule hearings that will work against the president's program in Central America.

The growing power over foreign affairs, and most recently affairs in Central America, has so raised the profile of the committee, once a congressional backwater that most members avoided because its mostly secret work had no home state impact, that 15 Republicans and 22 Democrats are said to have asked to be put on it this year.

Conservative sources point to a number of developments that weaken their voice on the critical panel. Majority Leader Robert Dole, R-Kan., turned down the request of Sen. Malcolm Wallop, R-Wyo., and others who wanted a waiver of the panel's eight-year membership rule so they could continue to serve.

A broad new study of Senate rules last month recommended such a waiver so the panel would not lose so much expertise at one time; nine of its 15 members are departing this year.

Mr. Durenberger opposed that waiver which, had it been granted, would also have applied to Sen. John Chafee, R-R.I., who by seniority would have then assumed the chairmanship instead of Mr. Durenberger.

Both Mr. Durenberger and Mr. Leahy have criticized the Central Intelligence Agency's covert support for the "Contras," the rebels fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

(This is also the view held by Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., the new chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.)

The intelligence committees oversee all U.S. intelligence operations, including the CIA, which has been supporting the Contras since 1981. Sometime after March 1 both houses will vote whether to contine that funding, which ran out last September. This vote is the focus of White House lobbying.

Administration figures are said to be preparing a report describing a Nicaraguan arms buildup and the nation's ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union as part of the administration effort to persuade Congress that Nicaragua is reducing civil liberties and becoming a growing threat to its neighbors.

Over the last two years the Senate panel has switched from support for the Contras to hostility because of a growing belief that the Contra purpose now exceeds U.S. policy objectives.

A committee summary of its work in 1984, released this week, was highly critical of the CIA and said its "inadequate management and supervision" of the Contras contributed to the loss of support in Congress for the program.

For his part, Sen. Durenberger has said he wants to continue pressure on the Sandinista government, but he svas CIA support for the Contras erodes rather than enhances Central American support of U.S. policy there.

Over the last few days, some conservatives say, prospects have dimmed for Mr. Reagan's policies.

Mr. Wallop believed he had Mr. Dole's commitment to the waiver that would have kept him on the committee, and when he did not get it he wrote an angry letter to the leader. On the Senate floor last Thursday, Mr. Dole told Mr. Wallop it was difficult to get an exception for him because work was under way on eliminating most exceptions.

"Sen. Wallop was greatly upset over the means by which he was removed from the committee while being assured that such was not the case," said one Republican senator who spoke only on the grounds that he not be identified.

Mr. Wallop has said he was particularly concerned that the committee was listening more and more to the CIA establishment that tends to favor technical information collection, while Mr. Wallop has called for more agents, with better protection, in world trouble spots.

Other changes under consideration by Mr. Durenberger are equally vexing to conservatives, who support the Reagan administration's view that the Contras are crucial in putting the military pressure on the Sandinistas to force them to move toward democracy.

Though no decisions have been made, according to a spokesman for Mr. Durenberger, he may eliminate the "designee system" whereby each committee member could appoint his or her own person to the committee's staff, which currently numbers about 41.

Instead, the chairman may appoint a professional staffer to each of the areas under the committee's jurisdiction — one for Nicaragua, another for arms control, terrorism and so forth — according to an aide to the new chairman.

Though Mr. Durenberger has asked for the ritual letter of resignation from everyone on the staff, most will not be accepted and the chairman "does not envision a house cleaning," according to his office.

However, conservatives see an anti-Reagan design because the proposed changes would consolidate power over staff under Mr. Durenberger and would make it more difficult for the new conservatives coming on the panel — such as Republican Sens. Orrin Hatch of Utah, Chic Hecht of Arizona and freshman Mitch McConnell of Kentucky — to place men of women of their own choosing on the staff.

However, some staff holdovers have already left, including staff director Robert Simmons and Angelo Codevilla, who was Sen. Wallop's designee but by some accounts also the most effective and most forceful advocate of President Reagan's Central American policy.

On Tuesday, Mr. Codevilla was told

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to have his desk cleaned out by 5 p.m., he said. Another source on the committee said it appeared that Mr. Codevilla was removed quickly and with no notice so he could not appeal the decision to other conservatives on the committee.

If a staff member leaves the committee, he must obtain a new security clearance, which requires about 60 days time.

"The real point is what Durenberger is doing in taking control of the committee is turning it into a battering ram against the president's policies, primarily in Central America," according to a committee source who is familiar with the maneuvering over the changes.

Conservatives see their declining influence on the budget for the CIA as another example of the erosion of their power on the committee.

Budget review of the CIA and other agencies in the intelligence community is a major responsibility of the committee, and this process is usually where the panel performs most of its "oversight" responsibility.

While a Durenberger spokesman said only that budget procedures are under review, several conservative sources say they believe he may eliminate the budget subcommittee so additional budget authority can be consolidated under the chaiman's office.

And, finally, conservative sources said they expect Mr. Durenberger to hold hearings early this year to investigate charges of atrocities committed by the Contras. If these allegations are proved to public satisfaction, they say, the administration's policy will be further undermined.

Mr. Durenberger's office said that no hearings are scheduled.

Roger Fontaine contributed to this article.

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